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A FRANCISCAN MISSION IN CALIFORNIA

CHURCH BUILDING AND DECORATION IN AMERICA

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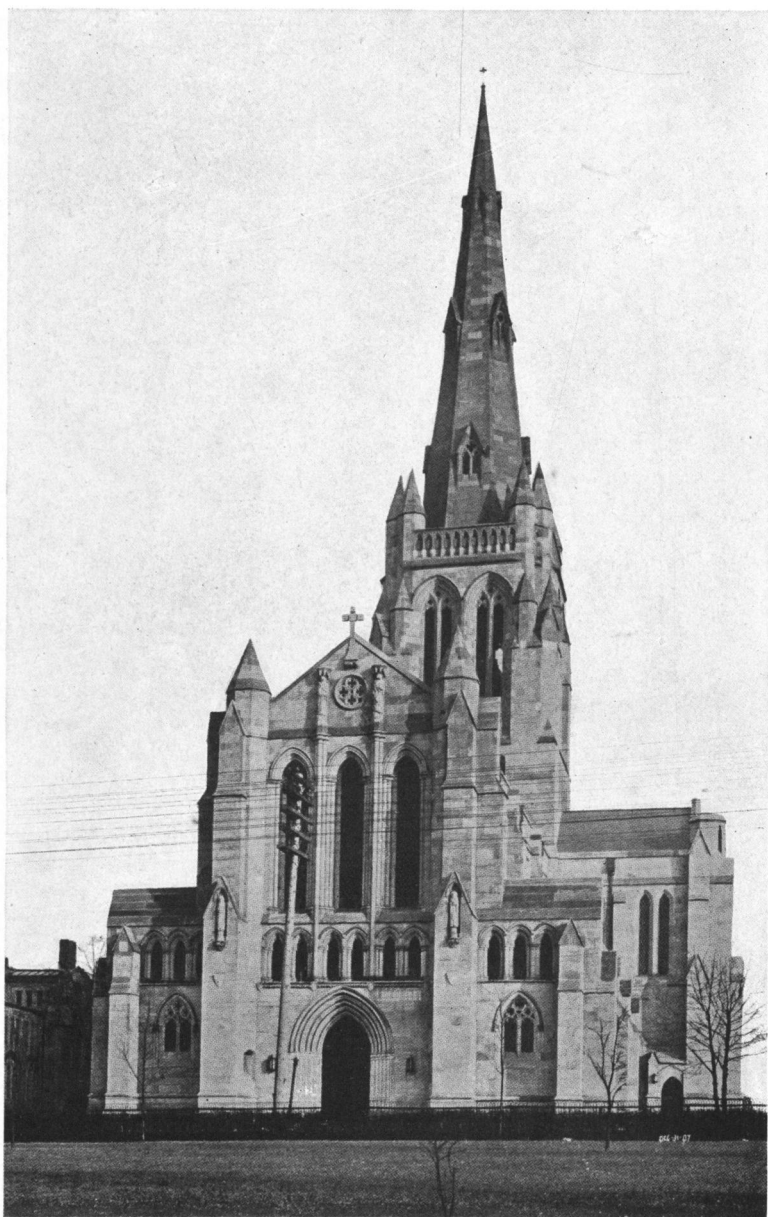
For out of old fields, as men saithe,
Cometh al this new corn fro yere to yere,
And out of old bookes, in good faithe,
Cometh al this new science that men lere.

Chaucer.

THE idea thus quaintly expressed as a truism some five hundred years ago is equally true today; it is true not only of old fields and old books, but of our best art. Thus it is quite necessary in beginning our article on Church Build-

ing and Decoration to turn our thoughts backward to the art of days long past.

In this magazine with its many beautiful illustrations we have already seen how artists have been affected by nature; and in what manner they have



CALVARY CHURCH, PITTSBURGH

CRAM, GOODHUE AND FERGUSON

been inspired to produce masterpieces in painting, sculpture and architecture. The special object of this particular treatise is to discuss the problems presented, and the difficulties mastered, in decorating our American churches.

In the first place we seem to find that the people of the earlier ages, especially

in those countries bordering on the Mediterranean Sea, were infinitely superior to us moderns in all forms of decorative art. The ancient glories of the St. Sophia in Constantinople were described by writers such as Paul le Silentiare who wrote poems inspired by the splendid stained glass which filled the

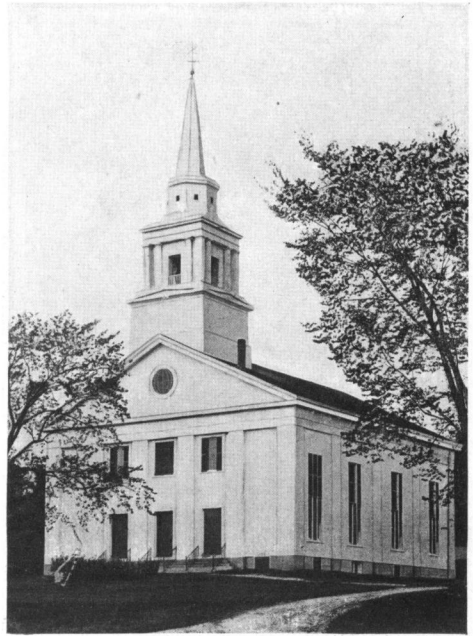
windows with resplendent color. The many wonderful churches and chapels of Italy are justly famous; and the Gothic churches with their magnificent portals, their gorgeous tracery, and their charming decorations are familiar to all who are really interested in art. And what could be more noble or enchanting than the ancient churches of England, Scotland, and Ireland!

It is religion that has set men at work on Cathedrals and Churches, not only that they might, by the magnificence of the building, create a place worthy to be called the House of God, but that such stupendous works might, at the same time, open the mind to vast conceptions, and fit it to enjoy the sanctity of the place.

To be sure, some Protestant churches have hesitated to employ painting and sculpture in decorating their buildings through a vague fear or prejudice; but during the last twenty years there has been an increasing interest on all sides in the best traditions of religious art, and a constant study of the venerable and beautiful churches of Europe.

We are now standing, I believe, on the threshold of a splendid future; epoch-marking buildings are going up around us, and many of the men are still living here in America who have opened for us the door of artistic opportunity.

At a time when our English and Dutch ancestors were building log houses and fighting for existence, churches were being built on our western slopes and on the edge of the Pacific Ocean that challenge the consideration of all lovers of stately proportions and noble construction. The beautiful missions of Santa Barbara, of San Carlos and San Luiz del Rey are still visited by admiring crowds and remain the most beautiful buildings in America. True it is that the kaleidoscopic changes in the early part of the last century nipped this mission architecture in the bud, and we have an example of fine ideas that came to naught. Before the decorative arts represented by various forms of painting and sculpture could be brought to perfection, the gold mines were discovered and



COLONIAL CHURCH, DUXBURY, MASS.

the whole country was upset and overrun by a swarm of adventurers and the Franciscan missions were practically destroyed. Instead of being an art accomplished, these mission buildings remain, unfortunately, monuments to an art that might have been. But they are, nevertheless, valuable incentives and are having a definite influence on our National Art.

Next in point of time and scale of merit came the colonial meeting house, severe and prim, on the village green. Its classic columns, its simple steeple, its high-backed pews, and its pulpit with its great sounding-board were not without a certain artistic style, modest and unpretending though it was. But chiefly this sort of a building is interesting as a reaction from artistic tendencies that prevailed in Europe.

The contrast is, indeed, extreme when we compare our grandfathers' meeting house with the pretentious domed and vaulted churches being erected at that time in Europe, where lofty arches were bedecked with profuse plaster ornament, or overpopulated with voluptuous angels poised on mighty wings, veritable "Birds



TRINITY CHURCH, BUFFALO

JOHN LA FARGE

of God," leading saints and prophets in tempestuous rout or wheeling in mighty circles with Bishops and Cardinals depicted in gorgeous array. The contrast between these two forms of art is, as I said, extreme, and yet our modern American art has been in a measure fed from these sources, and this conflict of ideas is confusing and has hampered somewhat the growth of our national art.

Immediately after the colonial period the character of our churches deteriorated rapidly as did the character of all our public and semi-public buildings. And, finally, the last vestige of architectural

reserve was swallowed up by contraptions in which the chief features were supplied by the turning lathe and the jig-saw. It is needless to say that sculpture and mural painting did not exist then in America.

A tawdry make-believe art was put up in the Catholic churches, and in the Protestant churches there was little or nothing. Not until the Gothic revival, a reflex of the work of Pugin and Ruskin in England, did we see the decay of church building arrested.

With this revival of Gothic, and the increased interest in church building, came an effort towards better decoration; but even the best had at least a semi-commercial character and though frequently charming as a reminiscence of something in Europe, it was in no sense a vital contribution to American art.

One serious effort at religious painting was made, however, in the year 1853, and, curiously enough, it was at our Military Academy at West Point, where in the Chapel was placed a large decoration by Mr. Robert W. Weir, who was professor of drawing at the Academy and whose original composition and whose studies from nature are a remarkable effort to throw off the bad traditions that hampered church decoration at that time.

No doubt in this period just before the war the popular mind was prepared for an artistic revival and signs of an artistic awakening were apparent in several churches built at that time. But before this movement was able to make head against established conditions there came our civil war, which absorbed all the best effort of the country in both the North and South. This was a severe blow to church building and decoration as it was to all the finer pursuits of our people and it took years for the country to recover from the disaster.

Our great modern impulse in religious art was due to the influence of what we call the Preraphaelite movement in England. Following the artistic activity and the literary propaganda of William Morris, Burne-Jones, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, there came an increased inter-

est in the early Italian church decorators, such as Fra Angelico, Gentili da Fabriano and the many artists who were living just before that period of the Renaissance sometimes termed the Pagan revival.

And the interest did not stop here, though it was a number of years before

Lathrop. While chance has fixed upon Mr. Lathrop more than on any other one man the stamp of missionary and pioneer, yet two other names stand out prominently as the forerunners of modern church decoration. They are John La Farge and Frederic Crowninshield.

In no way can I better explain this



FROM A COPLEY PRINT. COPYRIGHTED 1898 BY CURTIS AND CAMERON

DECORATION BY JOHN LA FARGE

there was any appreciable change in popular ideas about church decoration.

To be sure, as early as 1873 an enthusiastic pupil of Burne-Jones and William Morris returned from Europe after studying in England and on the Continent, but he found no demand for his decorative skill; and came to look upon himself as merely an artistic missionary.

This courageous and genial young man with Preraphaelite tendencies, this pioneer in church decoration, was Francis

modern movement in Church Decorating than by a short account of these three artists who blazed a new path in a new country; and whose names will always remain landmarks in American art.

In 1876 Mr. Lathrop was visiting Mr. John La Farge at the latter's home in Newport, Rhode Island, and their mutual friend, the architect Richardson, was building Trinity Church in Boston. There were conferences and hesitations as to the possibilities of creating a really artistic church interior that would com-



CARTOON

FRANCIS LATHROP

pare favorably with the ancient churches of Europe; and there were lengthy discussions as to possible ways and means.

Mr. Lathrop, much the younger, and fresh from his studies with Burne-Jones, was twenty-seven years old, while Mr. La Farge was already a man of mature experience, being forty-one.

The older artist was also a man of recognized artistic ability, having painted landscapes, portraits, and flowers, and achieved considerable reputation with his wood cuts. But even at this time Mr. La Farge was not a robust man, and had frequent attacks of illness.

Mr. Lathrop was full of strength and enthusiasm, "brashness of youth" he has sometimes said to me, and was ready to undertake anything in the way of decoration. I do not doubt but that this enthusiasm was very influential in bringing about the modern revival of church decoration in America. It was finally decided to decorate Trinity Church, a momentous decision; but when the day came for beginning the work Mr. La Farge was sick in bed at Newport, and Francis Lathrop, without previous practical experience in such matters, but filled with enthusiasm for the theory of the art, went gaily forward to decorate an epoch-marking church. It was a great undertaking, calculated to alarm almost any artist, and, above all, one who was not at that time an adept in such matters. But Mr. Lathrop went boldly forward, preparing the walls for the pictures and starting the ornamental painting of the ceiling. It was cold weather and there were many difficulties to overcome, such as insufficient scaffolding and obdurate materials. In about two weeks' time Mr. La Farge had sufficiently recovered to come to Boston from his home in Newport and assume control of the work, and while they both labored with good heart, yet, I am assured, that their paths were not strewn with roses. In the end, however, the paintings and windows of Trinity Church were wonderfully successful and even to-day remain in their general effect possibly the most perfect church decoration in America.

The glass, even more than the paintings, tended to increase the reputation of Mr. La Farge. For while he has often told me in his modest manner: "I was

only trying to do an old thing in a new way," yet by his great sense of color and his wonderful inventive faculty he revolutionized the art of stained glass.

While there was always in his mind a recollection of the beautiful glass in the early Gothic churches of France, for instance as we see it in Chartres Cathedral, yet there is no trace of imitation in his work. No detail of making a window escaped his penetrating mind and from making the glass to painting the faces every portion of his windows shows the stamp of master thought. He invented new kinds of glass and new ways of leading, but it is by "over plaiting" his windows that he obtained some of his most astonishing results. So great was the vogue of his ideas that they were published everywhere and his work was as well known in Europe as America. He was made an officer of the Legion of Honor and the medals and recompenses he has received are too numerous to mention.

Many are the churches in America that are graced by one or several paintings by Mr. La Farge. In New York the old St. Thomas Church that was burned in 1905 had some of his very important paintings in the sanctuary, and there are paintings and stained-glass windows in the Church of the Incarnation, in the Judson Memorial Church, and in the Church of the Paulist Fathers, besides many works of importance scattered throughout the country. But by far the most important of his paintings is the sanctuary painting in the Church of the Ascension at Fifth Avenue and 10th Street, New York City, where his deep

and harmonious coloring, combined with superb design, is seen at the very best.

The year after the decorating of Trinity Church found Francis Lathrop at work on large religious decorations for Bowdoin College; one in particular was a very original composition representing Moses bringing down the Law from Mount Sinai. This picture was painted in place, and he has often told me how he was looked upon as a seven days' wonder in the countryside; how models being scarce he used the people of the village, and what a social disturbance was created when he painted the village belle standing side by side with a very much despised expressman, whose picturesque features had attracted Mr. Lathrop's eye. But the most remarkable thing of all, in the minds of the college authorities, was the fact that this young man insisted on painting original compositions, making studies from nature, when what they really wanted were copies of old pictures—any old pictures would do.

Mr. Lathrop's stained glass and paintings were most successful and are to be found in many churches, but his masterpiece is the immense sanctuary picture in St. Bartholomew's Church, on Madison Avenue at 45th Street. Mr. Lathrop was working on this picture for almost five years and there are in it over 130 figures, many of which are of heroic size. It is of a very charming religious sentiment and is soft and illusive in color. Very careful studies in the matter of artificial lighting were made while the work was in progress and the ultimate result is a singularly beautiful expression of religious thought.

IMPROVING COPLEY SQUARE

BY FREDERICK W. COBURN

A CONTRACT signed last spring for seated figures to occupy the pedestals in front of the Boston Public Library signalizes a forward step in the artistic development of one of the most important public places in North Amer-

ica. It is unnecessary to sentimentalize Copley Square to appreciate that its appearance is an affair of somewhat more than local concern. Boston has become a mecca of vacationists and sightseers, and, particularly in summer time, the